SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF NEPAL UNDER JAYASTHITIMALLA (A. D. 1382–1395)

BY

Rajendra Ram

Before the time of Jayasthitimalla the social and religious structure of Nepal was largely Buddhistic and partly Brāhmaṇistic. Main basis of this structure was the process of social und religious tensions and cohesion at work in the eastern Iudian region where Islamic social and religious forces had emerged as a powerful proselytising agent in Indian society. The Muslim invaders had a lust of plundering the Buddnist establishments in this region of India. This presented a panicky atmosphere which compelled a large number of the Buddhist monks and guilds of Buddhist artists and craftsmen to take shelter in Nepal where they could get a warm treatment and kind hospitality. This Buddhist migration had remarkable civilizing effects on social and political structure of Nepal.

The Newars, the main constituents of the population of the valley of Nepal during this period, were very cordial and sensible to these changes. They were a part of the Mongoloid stock of people. Their customs, manners and behaviours in daily life were different from the rest of the population bearing the Brāhmaṇical influences. Ethnically also their characteristic physical features had separated them from the rest of the population in the valley who had their moral and cultural support in India.

The social rules of the Newars were not guided by any idea of the caste system. Their marriage rules were very flexible. Male and female members of their society were free to marry and divorce and remarry. Even the widows were allowed to remarry without any compunction. The stereotyped notion clustering round the moral thoughts of fidelity were out of question in their society. There was no system of untouchability in their society. The main ground of this social freedom was that their racial background was built up and guided by the principle of a common inheritance and it was this vital feeling which acted as a great uniting force in their communal and social consciousness. It also ensured a greater feeling of social security in Nepal. In matters of social importance and pressure the Newars occupy the same position in the Nepalese

society which the followers of the Brāhmaṇical order have in India with the only distinction that Newars of Nepal have been free from the blemishes of the caste system of the Indian society or the centrifugal elements inherent in the Varṇa system. It was because of this flexible social and cultural tradition that Buddhism suited well to their social philosophy. Their unhesitant nature in connection with cultural borrowing absorbed many religious and cultural values from different traditions. A great synthesis of social and religious ideas emerged out of the nature of easy adaptability the Newar community had possessed.

"Most societies that have been during a given period eager borrowers of elements from other societies have also been exceptionally innovative. Such societies are, in anthropological terms, 'cultural centres'. Florence and Venice were such centres of social change during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when they were cross roads of trade and travel; they borrowed from all peoples with whom they came in contact and also, and for much the same reasons, produced many indigenous innovations".[1] Nepal had also been one of the greatest "cultural centres" of Asia during early medieval period. It was the only country between India and trans-Himalayan countries which played the role of a great cultural buffer. Like Florence and Venice in Europe, Nepal was a great "cultural centre" of social change in Asia. Buddhist monks, merchants and traders from central Asia, Korea, China and Tibet frequently visited India through Nepal. Before coming down to India these trans-Himalayan travellers and traders stayed in Nepal in order to acquaint themselves with the new social and religious environments of India. Naturally they came into contact with the Newars who were quick and cordial community for extending their kind hospitality to foreigners. This process led to a great social and cultural synthesis in Nepal which is evident from the present social and cultural structure of the country preserved in the Newari community.

However, this flexibility had adverse effects on matters of political solidarity which always kept the Malla rulers restive in Nepal. The economic structure of the Malla polity was based on a peculiar mixture of the feudo-agriculture system and merchant guilds having their trade relations with India and trans-Himalayan regions. The merchant community of Nepal was an enlightened section of the Nepalese society. They had advantages of learning several new things of changing society outside Nepal through their regular trade-trips to those countries.

1 Richard T. La Piere, *Social Change* (McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1965), p. 107.

They bartered their merchandise with the Koreans, Mongolians, and Chinese in Lhasa. They spent days and nights together and exchanged food materials. Huge wealth in their possession made them important in Nepal like the local feudal lords. In many respects their good wishes and sympathy were sought by the rulers or claimants of the throne. Emergence of this moneyed class in Nepalese society created a new social environment where serious matters like political situations of different countries including Nepal were discussed. These merchants had to face several tariff rules and customs in course of their commerce and trade activities. Naturally they had practical experiences of different governmental systems. On the other hand, in spite of similarities at the levels of the ritual and religious behaviours in the Newari society the poisonous under currents of internal inequalities were swelling up gradually. The urban concentration of the Newars in the valley of Kathmandu led to status inconsistencies in the Malla dominion. Total impact of all these contradictory forces loomed large on the ideals of Malla polity. The sovereign rulers, the Mallas became unpopular in the eyes of people and a sort of discontent was growing on in the society. Consequently, in the beginning the Malla kingdom was badly infested with palace trickeries, street fights of the local chiefs and skirmishes of the royal princes for their control over petty regions. Easy adaptability of the Newars in Nepal to changing modes of society was one of the potent reasons which affected the idea of a stable polity adversely. An indifference of a significant merchant community towards the matters of political stability in Nepal was an unfortunate sign which led to general decline of human character and lowering down the image of good administration.

Jayasthitimalla realised all these weaknesses and found that several socio-religious forces were active at the root of troubles which led to the general decline of morale in society. He diagnosed the social systems and religious rites and observances of Nepal. First of all he turned his attention to the political conditions of his kingdom and took determined steps to reform them. In this connection although he did not abolish the feudal structure of Nepal, he seems to have effectively curbed, at least for the moment, the lawlessness of most of the turbulent local chieftains.[2] Like an efficient legislator, he formed a committee of five Brāhmaṇical scholars belonging to different schools of Hindu social views of India.[3] The Indian Pandits who assisted in "codifying the

2 L. Petech, *Medieval History of Nepal*, Rome, 1958, p. 139.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

whole structure of the Nepalese society in a strictly orthodox frame" were Kīrtinātha Upādhyāya Kānyakubja, Raghunātha Jhā Maithila, Śrīnātha Bhaṭṭa, Mahīnātha Bhaṭṭa and Ramānātha Jhā.[4] From this list it appears that Raghunātha Jhā Maithila and Ramānātha Jhā were the experts of the Hindu social ideas prevalent in Mithilā, Kīrtinātha, Upādhyāya Kānyakubja was the specialist of Hindu views of north India and Śrīnātha Bhaṭṭa and Mahīnātha Bhaṭṭa were the authorities of south Indian Hindu social ideas. Although we have no definite evidence regarding the authenticity of these three schools of Hindu social ideas during the period under review, from the titles of the names referred to above it appears that some currents of Hindu social views were flowing in different parts of India which could be utilised by these scholars in presenting a coherent idea to suit the socio-religious environment of Nepal.

It has often been remarked that the solidarity of the Hindu social system as represented by the institution of the caste stands in sharp contrast to the flimsiness of the political organisation[5] in India. But the contradictions between caste system and the political structure of the Brāhmaṇical society were re-examined under the guidance of Jayasthitimalla and a suitable shape could be given to the Nepalese social organisation based on Indian caste system. The code of social rules which emerged out of this effort was called *Nepāla-Rashṭra-Śāstra*.[6]

It has been stated that the Malla king presented a long list of sixty-four categories of castes.[7] Many earlier British scholars like B. H. Hodgson, F. Hamilton and H. A. Oldfield have referred to it. This list of sixty-four categories of the castes was revised by S. Lévi and he presented another re-arranged list consisting of forty-seven categories of the catess[8]. A great deal of discussion regarding the Newars has been presented by K. P. Chattopadhyay in a monograph[9]. L. Petech has

4 D. Wright, *History of Nepal*, Calcutta, 1958, p. 110; L. Petech, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

5 Nagendra Singh, *The Theory of Force and Organisation of Defence in Indian Constitutional History* (*From earliest times to 1947*), Bombay, 1969, p. 132.

6 L. Petech, *op. cip.*, p. 139.

7 *Ibid.*

8 S. Lēvi, *Le-Nepal*, vol. I (English translation type-script copy), Kathmandu, pp. 232-236.

9 K. P. Chattopadhyay, 'An Essay on the History of Newar Calture', *JASB*, Vol. 19, No. 10, 1923, New Series.

devoted one chapter.[10] to this vexed problem. Yet little satisfactory account of the caste system, authentic in connection with the Nepalese society could be presented by them. Almost all persons have simply re-arranged and summarised the list of castes presented by Hodgson and Wright or have based their studies on S. Lévi's account, which, itself suffers from mistakes because of his ignorance of idiosyncrasies of the Nepalese social ideas. All foreign scholars writing on this aspect generally utilised quack informants available in Kathmandu. Very late, scientific methods of research have been applied to interpret the social and political ideas in the history of Nepal. Some sociologists have done promising researches in this field. Names of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, Colin Rosser, Chie Nakane may be mentioned. Although these scholars have done their works on modern social systems of Nepal, the conclusions drawn by them may be utilised in evaluating the social conditions of Nepal under early medieval period. But at this stage it should be made clear that Jayasthitimalla did not claim to have formulated a new Hindu caste system in Nepal. A caste system was already present in Nepal. But it was badly affected by flexible social rules and religious ideals of the newly emerging Buddhist society of the Newars.

The Malla ruler took steps to revive Hindu social and religious customs and rites in Nepal. In this connection he encouraged the artistic motivations which had their support in religious and social traditions and in artistic professions of Nepal. Dramas based on Hindu mythological themes with emotional roles were staged in his court. Inscription behind the central stūpa of the Svayambhū Nātha temple at Kathmandu mentions Jayasthitimalla as the *Kṣatraratnākarendu* in Nepal. Important dramas which were successfully performed in the Malla court were (i) *Bāla Rāmāyaṇa* of Rājasékhara, (ii) *Abhinava Rāghavānanda-Nāṭaka* and (iii) *Bhairavānanda-Nāṭaka* both composed by Maṇika. Besides, two Śaiva saints, Śivadāsa Upādhyāya and Dvijarāja Upādhyāya played great proselytising roles under the patronage of Jayasthitimalla. Jayasthitimalla performed a *Kotyāhutiyajña* in A. D. 1395.[11] This panoramic religious performed was done purposefully to manifest the Brāhmaṇical influences in society and also to hazard the unchallenged domain of the Malla ruler. Several Buddhists were alleged to have been converted to Brāhmaṇical faith on this occasion. What Harṣavardhana did in the great religious convention at the confluence of Gaṅgā-Yamunā at Prayāga (Allahabad) during

10 L. Petech, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-189.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

the last period of his reign, was done by Jayasthitimalla in Nepal for the cause of Brāhmaṇism. One crore pot-holes for fire-offering must have engaged lacs of Brāhmaṇa worshippers and saints on this occasion which shows great transforming potentialities.

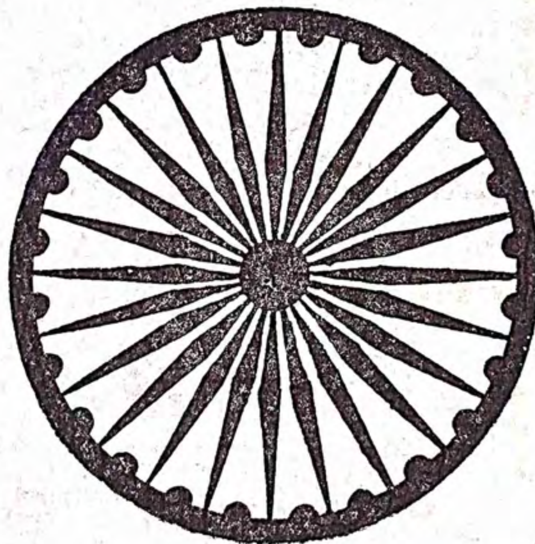
Several Maithila scholars loitering in the valley of Kathmandu utilised this opportunity in propagation of the orthodox Brāhmaṇical ideas among the Nepalese people. The Newars of Nepal were influenced by these changes and their casteless society gradually lost its identity of atheism under the social tension and pressure of the Brāhmaṇical followers The Newars, in stead of visiting the Buddhist pilgrimages in India, started visiting the Hindu shrines of eastern India. They took pleasure in offering oblations to their deceased forefathers at Gayā and Vārāṇasī. They took sacred bath in the Gangā, Yamunā and Sarayū rivers of India. Under the impact of this social and religious acculturation the Newars presented a peculiar image of Brāhmaṇism in Nepal. Nepalese Buddhism and Nepalese Brāhmaṇism are the two remarkable and proud creations of the Newars which differ from their original cults in many respects. Speciality lies in the fact that there is Buddhism in Brāhmaṇism and vice-versa in Nepal. Present social and religious structure of the Newars bear the testimony of this great social and religious overhaul.

THE JOURNAL
OF
THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOL. LVII JANUARY—DECEMBER, 1971 PARTS I-IV

CHIEF EDITOR

Dr. S. V. Sohoni, M.A., I.C.S., Vidyāvācaspati, D.Litt.



PUBLISHED BY

THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY, PATNA

Price Rs. 30/-